DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 508 CG 018 736

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TITLE Love and Romance over the Life Cycle.
PUB DATE 24 Nov 85
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (38th, New Orleans, LA, November 22-26, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; Attachment Behavior; Behavior Patterns; *Dating (Social); Emotional Response; Interpersonal Attraction; *Interpersonal Relationship; Marital Status; *Mate Selection; Middle Aged Adults; Midlife Transitions; Older Adults; Social Life
IDENTIFIERS *Love

ABSTRACT

Love and romance continue to be important issues within every age group, not merely among the usually studied college students. Two issues, the nature or intensity of the love experienced and the motives or purposes of love were examined for different age groups. The ways in which the pursuit of heterosexual love may change throughout adult life was studied. Similarities centered on shared definitions of romance but differences centered on the interpretation of love at the different ages. In younger years love was equated with emotional and physical excitement and romantic love was seen as passionate. In the middle years romance was seen in terms of companionship, security, and pragmatic benefits. In a quantitative study of mostly married men (N=71) aged 30-55, respondents placed the highest value on companionship and security in their marriages. In later life, falling in love had some symptoms of relationships in early life, but the companionate nature of love was seen as more important than passion or physical symptoms. A study of persons (N=60) aged 60 and older, and presently dating, indicated that while intimacy needs were still important, the exchange principle of rewards versus the costs of a relationship became a factor. The data supports the notion that the definitions of romance and romantic symbols evolve very little as one ages, but definitions of love take on a more pragmatic and companionate aspects as one ages. (ABB)

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# LOVE AND ROMANCE OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

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November 24, 1985

CG018736

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of love and romance have usually been conducted using younger (often college age) people as subjects. But love and romance continue to be relevant throughout the life course, as indicated by the research reported in this paper. Studies of married men in their middle years and single dating women and men who are older (60+) indicate that while the emphasis changes from passionate to companionate love as people get older, love itself remains an important part of relationships and that romantic symbols are virtually unchanged over the life span.

Introduction:

One of the first issues to deal with in presenting research on love and romance is a built-in prejudice. How can anything that is both so inherently interesting, and so difficult to measure scientifically, be of any possible sociological value? Robert Nisbet, in his book Sociology As an Art Form (1976:3), makes the following observation: "none of the great themes which have provided continuing challenge and also theoretical foundation for sociologists during the last century was ever reached through anything resembling what we are today fond of identifying as 'scientific method'." He then lists some of those themes, which include the areas of community, power, progress, development, conflict, anomie and alienation. The study of love and romance is certainly linked to the broader issues of anomie and alienation within our society.

In examining love and romance over the life course, the first problem lies in the fact that most research in this area has dealt with college age samples. However, the issues addressed in this literature do lay the foundation for studying love and romance within any age group. Those issues fall into two general categories: first, the nature or intensity of the love experienced, and secondly, the motives or purposes of love (Theodorson, 1965).

The nature and intensity of love, sometimes referred to as the type of love, have been examined by a number of scholars. Although there is some confusion in the literature in distinguishing between love and romance, or romanticism, most

scholars discuss initial heterosexual love with the assumption of a romantic component. This romantic component is generally linked to physical attraction and sexuality. Burgess and Locke (1953:327) note, "In romantic love the emphasis is upon sexual attraction, personal beauty and emotional response." Parsons and Bales (1960) discuss romantic love as that which emphasizes feminine attractiveness and possesses erotic overtones.<1>

Theodorson, however, notes that there is a second major value in the romantic complex. This is identified as "companionship between husband and wife based on a sharing of thoughts and actions, with each confiding in the other" (1965:20). The refinement of the dual notion of sexual love, and companionship in love, was provided by Walster and Walster (1978) who made the distinction between two major categories of love: passionate and companionate. According to Walster and Walster, passionate love cannot endure because of its intensity, and if it is unable to move to the less intense but more stable state of companionate love it will not survive. Interestingly, although not surprisingly, the literature discusses passionate love primarily as within the province of young people seeking mates, while companionate love is something that is assumed to happen to those who have married (Theodorson, 1965). Although passionate love often does characterize the love relationships of young people seeking mates, this categorization by age is important to keep in mind for our subsequent discussion of dating among the elderly.

The second issue addressed in the literature on love and romance is the issue of motives or reasons for dating. Most of the research on this issue also is centered on college age populations, generally addressing motives within the framework of mate selection (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1983). But as individuals age and subsequently begin to occupy different life stages, motives for seeking relationships also change. Obviously the twenty-two year old who is thinking in terms of future parental characteristics and role issues (breadwinner, housekeeper, etc.) in a partner is not looking for the same thing as the fifty year old. When we look at the findings for our elderly sample, we will see not only how the motives differ, but also that they appear less task-oriented and more directly related to filling intimacy needs.

In discussing both the nature of the love experience and the motives involved, one important factor that must not be overlooked is the broader social framework in which they occur. William Goode's article on the theoretical importance of love examines love as an "element of social action and therefore of social structure" (Goode, 1959:39). Goode notes that one of the major reasons for social control in love relationships is due to the important consequences of mate selection such as children and new family alliances. Viewed in this way one can see why the social response and pressures related to love would be different at different stages of the life course, particularly when the issue of offspring is absent. With less at stake, society is more likely to leave choices up to the individual, a fact which

is demonstrated in our study.

Although little has been written on the issue of love and romance over the life course, it has not been totally neglected. Martin Bloom (1967:246) has described love as a "significant human phenomenon spanning the entire life cycle." However, he conceptualizes love in its broadest terms, with heterosexual romantic love as one subset of a more generalized notion of love, and he concentrates on a developmental concept of types of love. In contrast, our work concentrates on heterosexual love alone and the ways in which its pursuit may change throughout adult life.

Love and Romance in the Younger Years:

Much theorizing and research have been done on subjects at younger ages concerning the nature and interpretation of heterosexual love. The psychological mechanisms of exchange, balance and reinforcement have been offered as plausible explanations for why young persons fall in love. And there have been numerous sociological attempts which seek to explain the process of dyad formation (Wheel Theory, Filter Theory, SVR Theory, and so on). In these attempts to examine the roots and development of love, much information has come to light concerning the definitions of love and romance at the early stages of the life course, summarized below.

Zick Rubin's (1973) work on liking and loving supports the idea that the youth of America tend to highly romanticize the experience of falling in love. A strong tendency to confuse sexuality and love is particularly true for young females due to the double standard which regulates premarital sexual behavior in

American society. What these studies imply is that young persons, especially women, tend to emphasize the passionate aspects of loving. According to Reiss (1980), romantic love continues to be a strong basis for one's first marriage. Consequently, as young people find they are no longer "in love" with their partners, they feel justified in divorcing and seeking another mate who will rekindle the passionate love which is so individually and culturally valued.

One has only to view the media's depiction of love relationships to understand the strong emphasis our culture puts on passion, "true love," and a monogamous commitment. Our socialization into loving at young adulthood reinforces the symptoms associated with the love experience, such as an inability to concentrate when in love, a heightened sense of reality, heart palpitations, and so on. Furthermore, the importance of "coupling" to determine one's status and to receive recognition within the peer group at younger ages further accentuates the romantic nature of young love.

A non-random survey by Rubin (1983) determined that even today there is a strong romantic ideal. Persons reported a consensual definition of romance which included a heightened state of consciousness. Furthermore, the majority of men and women sought love above romance in their relationships. In fact, when prioritizing the concepts related to relationships, both men and women ranked love as most important, followed by romance, then companionship, and lastly sex.

Much of the literature concludes that at the younger stages of the life course, women are the more romantic, but that men tend to fall in love more quickly and cling to a faltering love with more determination (Kephart, 1967; Nordstrom, 1982).

The body of literature on love and romance at young adulthood is expansive but often inconclusive. Yet it does seem evident that the passionate or romantic ideal of loving is heightened at this stage of life. Culturally we are taught that romantic love exists and that one "should fall in love" prior to marriage. Linton (1936:175) states this humorously though no less seriously :

> All societies recognize that there are occasional violent emotional attachments between persons of the opposite sex, but our present American culture is practically the only one which has attempted to capitalize on these and make them the basis for marriage. The hero of the modern American movie is always a romantic lover, just as the hero of an old Arab epic is always an epileptic. A cynic may suspect that in any ordinary population the percentage of individuals with the capacity for romantic love of the Hollywood type was about as large as that of persons able to throw genuine epileptic fits.

Love and Romance in the Middle Years:

As in the later years (described in the next section), people in their middle years define love and romance more in terms of companionship, security, and pragmatic benefits than in terms of the emotional and physical excitement of passionate romance they sometimes experienced in their earlier years. Romantic or symbolically romantic episodes are still enjoyed by couples in their middle years--flowers, or a love note packed in a lunch box--but the deeper companionship and mutual support

which younger people still have not had the time to develop are what people in their middle years value most in their relationship.

The value put on companionship in the middle years is illustrated by a qualitative study of seventy-one men, most of them married and aged 30-55 (Nordstrom, 1985; Nordstrom, 1982). When these men were asked what they like best about being married, the two most common words they used were the "companionship" and "security" they feel their marriage provides.

By "companionship" men mean that their marriage provides a friend who is built in to their life. This friend, their wife, is a person to whom the men can open up, sharing experiences, troubles and emotions over the years in a way men in our culture usually find difficult to do with other males. Men also say they find a degree of supportiveness and acceptance from their wife they don't get outside the home. The shared experience of establishing a home and raising a family is an important context for this friendship. An administrator in government says the thing he likes best about his marriage is

> the freedom it gives me to really be myself with somebody. I don't have to hold back any part of me. There's someone I can communicate with so deeply that I can share myself. Plus the value of having someone who gives me affirmation and reinforcement on a regular basis. That helps me get past those times when I just really see myself as a big shmuck, and wonder what I'm doing in this world.

An equipment serviceman says:

> There's a need fulfilled for human relationships, just knowing, feeling that there's somebody, that there is somebody there, that you're not alone.

A truck driver says:

> It gives me someone to share my life with. That's one reason we got married, to share our lives with each other. I enjoy coming home to a wife and family, rather than coming back to an empty apartment or even an apartment full of guys. I lived some of those days in the service, and they were enjoyable...but [this] gives me someone I can share my life with, and be open with.

A fire-fighter says what he likes about marriage is

> Having somebody always there, to soothe your problems. Having somebody always there who loves you a lot. It really makes you feel good to know there's one person, at least one person in the world, who loves you. And thinks you're a great person. A beautiful person. That's a real nice feeling....It's just real nice to have another person who can be your best friend.

Men in this study say they value "security" as well as companionship when asked what they like best about their marriage; the two are connected, since it is the companionship and acceptance that is part of what makes these men feel secure in the relationship. Having a companion, a best friend, as a spouse helps make the home a sort of "refuge" to which the men can return from a sometimes difficult and even hostile work world, for support and emotional repairs. A forester says: "I think a home is a kind of a security and a home-base you can go out from. I don't think it ties you down at all." A warehouseman says he likes "the security--always having somebody there to, you know, talk to, to always be there and depend on." An office worker says:

> My wife has given me a lot of security and stability that I wouldn't have.... What I mean by this is I need some security, and she <u>is</u> my security, very much so.

A millworker says:

> When I'm in my home I can do what I want to....At work or at church... I have to be an example to other people....Continually, people are looking at you, all

the time, and a lot of people are analyzing you.

The fact that two of the things these men like best about their marriages are companionship and security does not mean that the word love is absent from their vocabulary. In fact, when asked, most say they do love their wife. But when asked what that love is like, they usually describe it in terms of the kind of companionship and sharing and security described above, rather than as an intense physical or emotional passion. Many, in fact, admit that their early feelings have "cooled" over time, but say that their love has "naturally matured" to a companionate love rather than feeling that their love has died. The idea and importance of "love" in the relationship continues over time (that is part of the reason some men seem to feel a need to justify their satisfactions in terms of a "love" vocabulary), but the meaning of love is redefined as the relationship "ages."

The almost inverse relationship between the passionate and companionate varieties of romance and love is suggested in this study by the fact that those men who report the classically romantic symptoms when "courting" are also those most likely to have experienced "love at first sight." That is, they describe passionate feelings about their future wife not as a result of knowing her but in advance of knowing her. An upper level manager says:

> I was sitting in this restaurant...and she was sitting there. I looked at her, and I said I love that gal over there. I went and asked if I could sit down, and later on I did sit down, and later on we married, a year later....It's the first time in my life I ever thought I loved somebody immediately, and she thought the same thing immediately. It was love at first sight.

Perhaps the very nature of passionate romance depends partly on not knowing the other person well, as if the relationship lasts, its reality leads early romantic fantasies to seem unrealistic and to be gradually abandoned in favor of more lasting satisfactions which then inherit the mantle of the term "love."

Love and Romance in Later Life:

The life course perspective might well argue that the capacity to love, the definitions of loving, and the interpretation of romance with persons of the opposite sex change as one ages. On the other hand, there is reason to suspect that internal definitions of the heterosexual love experience are solidified in the earlier stages of the life course, and may remain fairly rigid over the life course.

To test this research question concerning the fluidity of love and romantic definitions over the life course, qualitative data was obtained on a sample of 60 persons age 60 or older who were presently dating. The sample consisted of men and women age 60 to 92, with a mean age of 69. Most subjects resided in the metropolitan Twin Cities, Minnesota area. Most were moderately healthy, mobile, living independently and alone, widowed, and white. There was less homogeneity in the sample in terms of social class, educational level, religiousity, and community integration. The vast majority of the respondents defined dating in later life as a monogamous, "going steady" type of relationship.

The sample was obtained through a variety of techniques aimed at making it as representative as possible. Some subjects

were members of a local singles club from whom a membership list was provided. Others had answered the researchers' advertisement placed in the personals column of a major Twin Cities' newspaper asking for volunteers to participate in the interviews. Still others were contacted through local senior centers. A snowball technique was also employed to access those persons who might not be affiliated with a singles club or senior center.

Data was obtained in qualitative face-to-face interviews each of which took approximately two hours to complete. Of those persons initially contacted to participate in the interviews, only one subject refused. Overall, the interviews yielded introspective data, often reflecting a need to relate to an impartial listener the problems and benefits of later life dating.

Retrospective data was collected to compare present definitions of love and romance with earlier dating definitions (dating typically done prior to first marriage, at age 17 to 25). Interestingly, most respondents reported limited dating experience when young, dating a small number of partners and most marrying their first dating partner.

While it is acknowledged that retrospective data may often prove to be unreliable, the researchers felt that the majority of older respondents could recall with a relatively high degree of accuracy their earlier dating experiences and love definitions. However, those subjects who were widowed did have a tendency toward spouse sanctification (Lopata, 1979) and accentuated the "love" felt for spouse as dating partner, while those subjects

who were divorced tended to minimize the intensity or extent of the love experience with their former spouse at the time of their initial dating.

Findings show that the experience of falling in love can and does occur in later life, but that it takes on a somewhat more pragmatic definition. To "fall in love" at age 75, one is said to experience many of the same symptoms associated with the developing love relationship--inability to concentrate, feelings of giddiness or elation, heart palpitations, and so on. As one 65 year old male respondent reported, "I knew I loved her when I saw her walk into the room and my heart went pitter-pat". Or as one 64 year old woman stated, "At first (when you begin to date someone) there's a kind of 'Oh, gee!' feeling about being in love...it's the thrill of something new".

But the vast majority of respondents reported that the passionate definitions of love (Walster and Walster, 1978) and the physical symptoms associated with such passionate love is down played in later life relationships. Instead, an emphasis on the companionate nature of the love relationship is highlighted. As one 65 year old man stated when comparing the experience of falling in love in later life to falling in love at age 24, "physical attraction has a lot to do with it (defining love) when you are younger, and personalities don't enter into it until later in life. When you're young love is chemistry, then getting to know the personality of your partner. It's the other way around when you're older...I'd say love isn't as exciting when you're older but in lots of ways you need it more."

So as the love experience comes to be more clearly defined in later life as companionate, there is a clear consensus that a shift occurs over the life course in definitions of heterosexual love. To complement this finding, respondents reported that not only do their definitions of love become centered on the companionate aspects of the relationship, but that their choice of dating partners and the reasons for continuing a dating relationship are centered on exchange principles. Careful scrutiny of the rewards versus the costs of the relationship is much a part of later life dating.

This is not to imply that exchange principles do not come into play in younger age dating, but when asked to describe the dating partner or the reasons for dating in old age the vast majority of respondents couched their later life dating experiences in exchange terminology. For example, when asked to describe her 69 year old dating partner, an elderly woman stated, "You begin to have peace of mind (when you're in love). You know you have someone to share with; it affects your whole life. When you know you're not going to look around and he's not either, you get that conjugal feeling...you know the rest of your life you're going to have dinner every Saturday night with your guy."

Interestingly, the word "love" was seldom uttered in the course of the interviews by the older respondents. It was most common that the interviewers brought up the term and asked the respondents to comment on the extent to which they loved their dating partners. Usually they replied that "love is important when you're older, but you have to be practical about who you

choose" or "love in dating relationships is very important at any age. I thought about it in the few months between my wife's death and when I began dating that I could find someone I was compatible with, but without a strong love relationship...but then I thought 'why settle for that when I don't have to?' You have different concerns when you love someone when you're older; things like health and loneliness."

The researchers conclude that while intimacy need fulfillment (Reiss, 1960) is still a primary aspect of the dyadic relationship in later life, it has evolved into more pragmatic definitions and a clearer sense of the exchange principles involved in love's formation and continuance for the couple. Let it be clearly understood that these data reveal that loving is as important in later life as at the earlier stages in life; perhaps even more important due to decreased intimate social contacts so readily available at younger ages. But there is a tendency to focus on the companionate nature of heterosexual love relationships, and a movement away from the passionate emphasis of 'young' love.

It is, of course, a fundamental question as to why or how such definitions of love evolve throughout the life course. Most respondents reported that loving takes on a more pragmatic and companionate nature when reaching retirement age due to the struggle to fill leisure hours, coupled with shrinking social networks. But a sizable number of older persons reported that love took on a more companionate aspects as they aged because they had learned through the marital relationship that "passion

doesn't last." Or as one 66 year old divorcee stated, "You don't fall in love so fast when you're older. I can tell the difference between love and chemistry (passion) now, because I've learned what it is I want and need from a woman...and it's more than just sex and excitement."

Therefore, it seems a plausible argument that this cohort of older persons, most of whom had relatively little experience dating prior to first marriage and who report an inability to differentiate between physical attraction and love at the earlier stages in the life course, feel that the marital relationship fostered a learned understanding that passion inevitably gives way to companionate forms of love.

It is also interesting to note that while the older persons highly enjoyed the excitement and spontaneity of passionate love found in the beginning stages of the dyad formation, an awareness of the dual nature of love gave emphasis to the companionate side as the 'better' dimension of loving due to its durability.

The definition of romance tends toward more consistency across the life course than does the definition of love. While older persons saw a movement from passionate interpretations of loving to a more companionate emphasis, the ir conceptof romance did not seem to differ significantly when perceptions of their younger and older years.

Most older respondents defined romance in terms of the traditional symbols such as flowers, an exchange of gifts, candlelight dinners, and vacationing together. All these were offered as examples of romantic gestures in their present dating

experiences. There was a slight tendency for older men to perceive sexual intercourse as "romance." "The most romantic thing we've done...going to bed. You can talk about candlelight dinners and sitting by the fireplace, but I still think the most romantic thing I've done is to go to bed with her," stated a 64 year old male dater. Older women seldom equated romance with sexuality, and found it somewhat easier to offer tangible examples of romance in the relationships. It was not the case, contrary to the literature on gender differences in love and romance (Rubin, 1973), that women more highly valued romance in later life than did older men.

Neither men nor women, however, felt that romance was the core of their dating relationship in later life. Many saw romance and even sexuality as "frosting on the cake...very nice but not the reason I date". Here again an emphasis on the companionate nature of the dating relationship took precedence.

The interview data support the notion that much correspondence exists in the definitions of love and romance over the life course, and that many of our attitudes and values toward opposite sex relationships remain fixed over time. This is especially true for the definitions of romance, with the normative symbols of romance evolving very little as one ages. There is evidence, however, that definitions of love take on a more pragmatic and companionate aspect as one ages.

Another of the key differences between younger and older age dyad formation is that of the pace of relationship formation. Many older persons relate an accelerated pace of dyad formation

due to their perception of a constricted life space and the belief that life experiences have taught them to be more keenly aware of the characteristics they are seeking in a dating partner. Hence, "game playing" or "playing the field" seems to be greatly reduced in later life heterosexual dyad formation.

Both similarities and differences are manifest in comparisons between early and later life dating relationships. While the similarities seem to be centered on shared definitions of romance, differences are apparent in the interpretation of love at the different ages. But though love's definition may be modified for older persons, the evidence suggests that loving and attachment remain as powerful elements in an older person's heterosexual dating experiences.

Summary:

Obviously, one of the biggest drawbacks in this study of love and romance over the life course is the lack of comparable samples of persons at the early, middle, and later stages of the life course. Most college age samples concerning love are obtained on never-married singles, and our paper attempts to contrast this group to a cohort of midlife married men and a sample of older widowed/divorced persons. But such a variety in samples is only to be expected over the life course when one is studying changes in relationships over time; similarities in samples would perhaps be more misleading than useful, since (for example) a group of never-married older people would probably differ from never-married young people in more ways than age.

Our data imply that as one ages and experiences "typical" transitions in heterosexual dyadic relationships (such as first love, premarital dating, marriage, marital disenchantment, divorce, widowhood, and postmarital dating), the definitions of romance remain fairly constant while the concept of love is altered. Love becomes increasingly rooted in exchange principles, and a dramatic shift from passionate to an emphasis on the companionate nature of love occurs. Our findings also challenge the wisdom of generalizing to older people the ideas based on studies of younger people that women more highly value romance (Rubenstein, 1983) and that the early stages of dyad formation are most often manipulative and game-like (Bach and Wyden, 1969).

In conclusion, although definitions of love and romance tend to develop throughout the life course, love remains a highly valued aspect of dyadic relationships into the older years.

Footnotes

<1> With the hindsight that feminist scholarship and consciousness has provided us, it's obvious that such conceptions are rather male-centered and heterosexual in their assumptions.

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